

Together

It was about eight o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday. Seema hastily announced to her brother Sarat that she had readied his bath water in the usual bucket. She then proceeded to help Palani, the hired cook of her household, finish preparing his lunch that he would be carrying in a small aluminium box to his workplace – a government-run school in the vicinity. Sarat, the self-proclaimed head of his family, was still in bed rubbing sleep off his eyes.

Sarat was a teenager when his father became a government employee, after years of fruitless attempts, and admitted him to an English-medium school, seventy kilometres away from home, in the city. But Sarat struggled to cope with the constant bullying in his new school. Not only did his classmates openly mock his appearance but also his class teacher giggled at their jokes glorifying colourism. “During tiffin time, a group of boys drag me out of the class, if I don’t go out on my own, saying that they lose their appetite when they see me eating my food with my black hand. I have to stand in the corridor and finish my meal. Only the furniture of the school is supportive of me every time I have to put my head down in distress. The English teacher hardly ever speaks any English, let alone the others. The other day, I caught the mathematics teacher slanging me under his breath when I requested him to repeat an explanation of a numerical...” Sarat complained to his parents and elder sister against the ill-treatment towards him at school that one time he had a breakdown in vain. They wouldn’t discontinue his education there as, according to his mother, Savitri, the name of an English-medium school would look good on his resume. “English is the language of our family’s pride. You must withstand every hardship to learn it and outsmart your cousins,” declared his father, Harish.

Sarat had just graduated from college with an honours in History when the whole country locked down for the first time to prevent the new unpredictable virus from infecting the entire population. Healthcare services in the town’s only hospital were paralysed as most of the visiting physicians took an indefinite leave of absence. It was during those trying hours that Seema had to phone the local allopathy doctor, whose treatment they couldn’t always afford, for her father. The doctor reluctantly paid Harish a visit, but he refused to go near him as he lay unconscious, with his head rested on Sarat’s lap, on the floor in the living room.

“Father just fell down suddenly and now he’s not really breathing! He was complaining of fatigue earlier today. You can come closer freely. We aren’t the Dalits or Shudras!” said Seema.

“The pandemic has turned all of us into untouchables! Damn it... I can’t even ask you to take him to the hospital!” the masked medical practitioner snarled at the young man, maintaining a five feet distance from the patient.

“You can’t let him die, doctor!” cried Sarat. Seema was massaging Harish’s hands in an attempt to revive him.

"Well...can you check if he has a pulse?" the doctor shouted, demonstrating how to measure the pulse rate of a person.

"No...he doesn't seem to have any!" exclaimed Sarat, checking for Harish's pulse. Then the agitated young man tried to restart his father's heart in vain by performing the cardiopulmonary resuscitation on him, inaccurately following the doctor's vague instructions.

Savitri stood in the background, observing the unbelievable insanity within the four walls.

The morning after Harish's funeral, Savitri informed her son and daughter that she'd soon be leaving them for a different life in the metropolis. "My cousin, Sangeet, is the first person I got in touch with after Seema taught me how to use the internet on my phone. He supports my desire to be independent. He will help me settle down in Bankim *babu's* house in the city. Bankim *babu* and his wife let their fellow SUCI party members from impoverished backgrounds live under their roof. They are involved in various cultural activities to promote the party's ambitions across the city. I'll join them as soon as vehicular movement resumes in the state."

"What ... what are you saying? Are you talking about that crossdresser whom your uncle disowned for his feminine attitudes? You're joining politics? ... How can you even think of joining politics, and...what talent do you even have besides cooking and cleaning?" Sarat appeared disgusted by the thought of his mother's new freedom.

"You both probably don't even remember meeting Sangeet when you were toddlers. You don't know me as an individual either, and it's not your fault. But I'm no longer the woman who slaved away to last her unhappy marriage. I realised how absolutely indifferent I had become to your father's plight when he died."

"Perhaps you have been waiting to become a widow and have your dead husband's pension all to yourself! We've always felt your lack of love towards father," commented Seema. "Lately, your hatred for him became prominent when you stopped cooking him his favourite five side dishes with rice for lunch. You've started doing as you please in this house ever since grandmother, father and your last surviving guardian, passed away."

"That must be why you and your brother didn't even allow me to give him a sip of saltwater until the doctor issued his death certificate."

"No, it's because salt would be bad for his heart," Sarat explained in a haste.

"Says the one who didn't even want to call the doctor for his suddenly unresponsive father..." Savitri smirked as she noticed the shadow guilt had cast on her son's face. Seema had nothing to say in defence of Sarat. "If...you ever feel sorry for your father," continued Savitri, "especially you, Sarat, I need you to know that your father used to rape me. You both were conceived in what the law still doesn't recognise as a crime. I didn't raise my voice against it much earlier because I was terrified of the society that taught me to diligently do everything my husband would ask of me, no matter how exhausted I was in body and mind..."

However, on that bright Tuesday, just as Seema was going to the marketplace after Sarat had left for work, an out-of-towner showed up at her door. It was a pale young man she hadn't ever seen before.

"You must be Seema, Sarat's brother. I have something extremely important to tell you," he said to Seema.

"Who are you?" Seema asked, running her eyes over his bony physique.

"I am a journalist working for The New Times, and I also went to primary school with your brother. Must you make me stand outside in this heat?" he continued, seeing that the confused woman, possibly in her late twenties, couldn't find words. "This is about your brother. May I come in?" His voice was hoarse, his tone gentle.

She brought him into her living room and carefully locked the door behind them. Palani came out of the kitchen to learn about the complete stranger in her employer's home.

"Who's she?" asked the man looking at Palani.

"She's like family. What did you want to say about my brother?" Seema seemed impatient.

Sitting down on the sofa, he admired the woman and her cook who grew increasingly anxious the longer he waited to tell them the reason behind his visit. "Well, you should lean against the wall if you don't want to sit down for what I'm going to tell you isn't pleasant."

"What is it?" Seema whispered, apparently anticipating the worst.

"I believe you have watched or read the news about the discovery of an unidentified body in the Ganges on the outskirts of the city."

"What does that have to do with my brother?"

"Well, the body is unrecognisable as it has been in the river for a long time. It's hard to tell if the body is male or female. Even the clothes of the body have no tags. But I'm quite certain that the deceased is Dr. Sitaram Modi, even if the forensics are yet to confirm it."

Seema, subtly trembling, reclined into a chair. Palani began to listen more closely.

Within a year of Harish losing his life, a relentlessly debilitating fever caused Sarat to go to the local hospital, accompanied by his mother and Seema, seeking allopathy treatment as an outdoor patient when alternative treatments failed to cure him. There, the general physician, Sitaram Modi, handed him some papers to sign after hearing out his symptoms. Sarat spent a couple of minutes reading the papers before signing them. He then assured the doubtful patients that signing the papers, containing lengthy paragraphs written in English, was only a formality that they were required by the government to do. Then a nurse took him into another room, crowded with more patients, and gave him a sachet of pills. He had to wait half an hour after taking a pill before the nurse allowed him to go home.

The first pill normalized his temperature but Sarat felt sicker than ever as he kept taking those pills one by one, following the doctor's prescription. Fortunately, Seema was able to revive him with a common Homeopathy antidote to artificial toxins by identifying his hepatotoxic symptoms that she had seen her employer, a local herbal medicine practitioner, treat in a patient, plagued by side effects of allopathy drugs.

A few weeks later, schools, all over the state, slowly began to reopen post-pandemic. Sarat inherited the job of a teacher, on compassionate grounds, that his father had at the local government-run school for boys. He, of course, had to promise a couple of officials of the state's School Service Commission to pay them a part of his salary every month for helping him out of the extremely lengthy process of lawfully getting the job. But, he encountered unreasonable hostility from the locals who once looked up to him for being English-educated.

"From what I have heard about the case, there was an unknown man living in the *ashram* close to the river where the unidentified man's body was seen floating over four months after the unknown living man vanished from the *ashram*. The police have identified that unknown living man as Dr. Sitaram Modi, but they can't yet be certain if the corpse is his," Palani stated.

"It's obvious that the corpse is Dr. Modi's. Have you, Seema, watched the footage of him throwing purple plastic bags, each one containing something we can't know, in dumpsters at different locations around the *ashram* where he was last seen residing? It has been aired on the local news channels."

"Yes," said Seema.

"The mysterious man had been staying at the *ashram*, almost since the time Dr. Modi stopped coming to this town, without submitting any of his legal documents of identification. The *ashram* administrators let him take shelter there out of goodwill. He did not appear poor but, according to the monks of the *ashram*, there was something wrong with his memory. The fact that none of the people at the *ashram* had seen his face, for he always wore double surgical masks, made me suspicious of him. Then, this may sound ridiculous but, I tried to locate the plastic bags he had dropped off at various places. I didn't expect to find any after so much time had gone by since they had been discarded. But, thanks to our lousy government, there was this one mountain of garbage left undisturbed for months in a secluded part of the city, as shown in the footage. That's where I managed to hire a ragpicker to find one of those purple plastic bags with all its contents intact. It was discovered among the rubbish with great difficulty, as I had expected. In that bag was a notebook containing the records of a person's daily expenses. One of his entries was about an online transfer of a handsome amount of money from one phone number to another. Tracing the phone numbers mentioned in the notebook I discovered that the sender's number belonged to the Dr. Sitaram Modi who has been on the run for the past eleven months ever since the police discovered his involvement in the illegal drug trials conducted in different rural areas, including this town."

"Who does the money receiver's number belong to?" whispered Seema.

"Sarat."

"How long ago did he receive this money? Was there any information on the date of that transaction?" Stupefaction registered on Seema's face.

"Two years ago in September." He showed the ladies photographs of the notebook and its individual pages on his phone.

"What did you just say about a drug trial here?" Palani fearfully questioned the journalist.

"Two years ago, Dr. Modi tested a controversial foreign medicine for influenza on a few people here without their informed consent, according to the testimony of his colleague who is currently being tried for the same crime she committed elsewhere," he informed her.

Palani stood ashen-faced. "When I first heard rumours about the trial, I adamantly refused to believe that our Dr. Modi would use us as guinea pigs for his monetary gain. Our Dr. Modi!" she muttered.

"Why do you think he paid my brother money around that time?" Seema asked him.

"So that Sarat could influence others here to sign up for the drug trial. He is probably one of the very few English-educated people in this conservative town, and word spreads rapidly if a highly educated person agrees to undergo a new treatment. People then don't doubt the intentions of the physician introducing it to them," he explained.

"But my brother was really sick himself, and his condition worsened after taking those pills, one at a time."

"Oh, he has always been a master at feigning illnesses since childhood. You, as his elder sister, should know it better than me that he possesses a passion for acting. And it's possible that, unlike the other patients, he was given placebo in a sachet resembling that of the one on trial," he remarked.

"Well...my brother wasn't acting!"

"Did you ever measure his temperature with a thermometer?" he asked.

"We don't have one. But I did have to give him a Homeopathy medicine when he said that his condition was worsening after taking a few of those unknown pills."

Palani stormed out of the house, walking away from it as fast as her legs would allow, without any explanation.

"This is all too complicated for me to process..."

"I will be back later to let you know what I want in exchange for deleting the evidence." The man saw himself out, leaving a listless Seema in her sunlit room.

"Look, Durga is as black as Asura!" joked a thickset man from the audience of a religious street play held by a group of SUCI members. "What happened to last year's Durga?" shouted a voice from the crowd, interrupting the play.

Savitri was unsuccessfully playing the role of Goddess Durga, which had always been acted by Sangeet, in the mythological play aimed at promoting feminism among the right-wing city dwellers in the month of Durga Puja. But, that day Sangeet was unavailable.

When Sarat came home from work in the afternoon and explained to an infuriated Seema that the journalist was none other than their mother's cousin, Sangeet, who was doing them a favour, and that he had created the evidence using Photoshop to incriminate himself, Seema slapped him across the face, demanding to know the reason behind their deceit towards her.

"Within a few days of my recovery from the ill-effects of those drugs, I noticed that our acquaintances here either avoided eye contact with me or they appeared to laugh at me. I couldn't confront them. I know they did that to you too...and they still do. My friends avoid starting a conversation with me and only half-heartedly engage in small talk when I encounter them on the roads or ring them up. I haven't heard you talk about your friends in a while either..."

"Well, mine are married off. They can be busy... Besides, I don't care if they want to cut ties with me!"

"It all began with me signing those papers in front of all those people, and when the pills probably harmed them, they began to think of me as an imbecile like their poorly educated children!"

"What does that have to do with you and mother playing me with a third person?"

"Are you an imbecile?"

"Yes, I wasn't sent to an English-medium school. So, I remained an imbecile like most others here, including our parents."

"I wanted your genuine reactions to Sangeet's claims because only then Palani wouldn't doubt his words and the fake evidence he had produced before her to turn me into a villain. I want her to tell every soul she meets what a monster I am."

"Why would you even want to be a criminal in the outsiders' eyes?"

"Because it's way better than them doubting my ability to read and understand English!" Sarat's voice grew inaudible. "You know that the truth is I don't understand much English beyond a few colloquial phrases people on TV usually pepper their vernacular with. That day, I couldn't comprehend what the paragraphs on the papers, all typed in English, actually meant, but I signed them anyway to flaunt my English-education to the hospital staff. I've always tried to save our father's face..."

Suddenly, their door bell rang, startling the siblings. Seema opened the door to see that Palani had returned.

"I have come for my purse that I forgot here," the woman said sternly, as she entered the house to look for it.

As soon as she noticed Sarat, she stopped the search and slowly began, "My cousin... She was sick with what seemed to be the flu, a couple of years ago, and she had to sign some forms written in English. She

told me that she had signed it only because she saw the English-educated Sarat do the same in front of her... Two weeks later, she had a seizure. She never recovered from it... After your mother migrated to the city, most people of this town have hated you and your family, but I did not. I resumed serving you after the lockdown was lifted. I have tried to keep an open mind about the fact that your mother abandoned both of you to live and work with a bunch of uncultured urbanized communists right after her husband's death, just like a shameless woman!"

"Is that why people have been cold towards my brother and me?"

"Yes. People here have known all about your mother's flamboyance from social media. Some of them even say on to each other that your mother killed your father to become an urban whore. How will you ever hear the rumours about your family if you both avoid communication with people by clogging your ears with earphones when you're outside?"

The evening Harish failed to respond to the cardiopulmonary resuscitation carelessly performed on him by his son, the doctor pronounced him dead and issued his death certificate. Savitri poured saltwater into his mouth, forcing it open with her fingers, as soon as the doctor made himself scarce. Sarat and Seema, about to begin planning the old man's last rites, speechlessly watched the legally dead man show signs of life.

"Can you please be dead to the world so that I can have your job now?" whispered the unemployed son to his puzzled father who had barely opened his groggy eyes.

The neighbours heard the women of Harish's household wailing, but nobody dared near their gate, fearing that they'd be infected with the deadly virus which, they believed, may have killed Harish. Sarat tightly wrapped discarded old clothes and a couple of bolsters positioned vertically in a blanket and carried it, what looked like an enclosed human body, outside to be tied to his motorcycle, with the help of the gloomy Seema. The neighbours thought that the blanket was covering the body of Harish to check the spread of germs from his corpse into the surrounding. Sarat drove for miles with the dummy to reach a deserted farmland where a partially covered deep well, neglected for nearly a century, was located. Sarat dumped the pile of pillows and clothes into the well's unexplored pit.

After Palani took off with her purse, disgusted, Seema started cooking dinner – vegetable stew and *chapati*. Once the food was ready to be served, Sarat unlocked the door of the master bedroom where his father remained in absolute quietness. He would be confined to the queen sized bed of the dark room, whose tightly shut windows prevented the entry of even a single ray of sunlight or streetlight, whenever there was an outsider, including Palani, at home.

"You didn't hear us, did you?" Sarat asked the old man as softly as he could.

"What is going to become of me if I fall ill?" he whispered in Sarat's ears.

"Seema has saved my life with her knowledge in Homeopathy. She can save yours too if needed."

